

vessel // llestr

Dylan Huw



Dylan Huw is Jerwood Writer in Residence from January 2022 – June 2022. This is his response to Jahday Ford and Vicky Higginson’s glasswork commissions, *Axle* and *Coping Mechanisms* respectively as part of Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open at Jerwood Space, closing on 9 April 2022.

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According to the Google Books Ngram Viewer, usage of the word *vessel* [peaked](#) in 1866. Because [I am the way I am](#), this sends me down a path of digressions from which I may not return, exploring some possible meanings ‘contained’ within that year. I invite you to join me on this futile quest, if you have a minute, though you might regret it. Did you know Butch Cassidy was born the day before Anne Sullivan? (Both would provide A-list movie stars in the sixties of the following century with signature roles in Oscar-winning films, though cinema had of course not been dreamt up yet in 1866; the Lumiere brothers were infants, and Edison a teenaged employee of the Associated Press bureau news wire.) William Kandinsky was born

in December of that year, the same week that the Oaks Colliery explosion in Yorkshire killed 361 miners and rescuers. Veneto was annexed by Italy, and in the United States, where Jesse James robbed a bank for the first time, Congress passed its first Civil Rights Act. The Austro-Prussian War began and then ended, *Crime and Punishment* was published, and Alfred Nobel invented dynamite. Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau, Wales' national anthem, was sung at the Eisteddfod Genedlaethol for the first time, and my maternal great-great-great-grandmother, Martha, died.

The Cambridge English Dictionary gives the following definitions for the word vessel:

- a large boat or a ship;
- a curved container that is used to hold liquid;
- a person who has a particular quality or who is used for a particular purpose;
- a tube that carries liquids such as blood through the body.

In my mind these all might as well say: A container for metaphor! (It is my sincere belief that dictionary definitions should incorporate exclamation marks where appropriate.) Or: A vehicle for some sublimated meaning, at which we might never arrive. (I think, as I often do, of the egg-shaped vessel in which Lady Gaga stayed incubated for 72 hours before the Grammys ceremony at which she'd perform "Born This Way" live for the first time.) Although I have been staring at the word *vessel* for so long I now struggle to relate it to any of these meanings, perhaps to the very concept of meaning itself. Perhaps I could make this collapse instructive in my exploration of how work presented in the Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open evokes craft practices' capacity for transcending their material reality to become vessels for high fantasy and wild imagination and limitless meaning. Perhaps not.

It occurs to me that I often do this when I am writing, particularly about (around, alongside, et cetera) art; an impulse to reduce a subject or a theme down to its barest form, little but letters on a page. (This probably has something to do with the fact that Welsh is my first language, and that my formal education switched abruptly from that language to its hegemonic cousin more or less the moment I hit adulthood, and that, perhaps as a result, I am prone to seeking methods of estranging myself from the English language, sometimes finding myself estranged from it against my will, always looking for ways of making it foreign and unknowable in the way I wish, deep down, it truly was.) Interesting things can come out of these reductions and estrangements, although of course sometimes, most of the time, they do not.

The word vessel appears three times in the press release for the Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open, not including the artists' bios. Jahday Ford's *Axle* is described as "a family of large glass vessels," and reference is twice made to the "five collaboratively made vessels in copper and silver, displayed on one large plinth" which constitute the centrepiece of Francisca Onumah and Helena Russell's *Invaluable Tool* (about which I wrote [previously](#)). The word might also

have replaced 'pieces' or 'objects' in the paragraph on Vicky Higginson's installation, particularly as this is the part of the exhibition most deeply steeped in the notion of crafted objects as vessels for flights of fancy. Though the exhibition's contributions from Higginson and Ford are wildly different in style, subject and technique, both bodies of work (Higginson's a highly self-contained installation, Ford's placed at two ends of Jerwood Space's ground floor) narrate in their own ways how glass might transcend itself, might become a vessel for the impossible in all its potentiality.

For *Coping Mechanisms*, Higginson devised an elaborate set of fictional healing devices, which are displayed in the Jerwood Art Fund Makers Open as an assemblage of highly imaginatively rendered hand-blown and cold-worked glass objects. At once conceptually and formally complex, the body of work is a suggestive folk-futurist send-up of wellness culture's claims to universal, eternal betterment. In devising the devices, Higginson wedded her life-long interest in folklore and fairytales with extensive research into the shapes and functions of historic medical instruments. The final installation contains a fairytale, written by the artist, displayed in vinyl text above the objects, lending them both welcome context and further mystique. The rich palate of techniques and research evident in *Coping Mechanisms* gives the impression that there could be a million more lives to these devices, and to the agglomeration of references and inspirations which led to their unlikely existence, here, now.

When I first read about this installation I imagined an artist desperately pitching a set of impossible healing instruments on *Dragon's Den*. The Dragons were not into it, at all. When I finally saw it in real life I appreciated their high absurdity, how elaborately this system of impossible quick-fixes was constructed, how much these objects seemed to believe their own hype; there is almost a camp sensibility there in its eagerness to make you believe the impossible. The devices' impossibility, when witnessed in the flesh, feels refreshing, necessary, a tonic in a time of claustrophobic literalism. Their gag being, of course, that the world in its entirety will never make sense, can never be fully graspable, and that even the most fantastic imaginations' most utopian inventions could not begin to scratch the surface of the problems faced by human impulses and emotions. What, after all, is a fairytale if not a tool itself, an instrument, with which we aim to penetrate those least penetrable elements of our characters, of the lands on which we live, of the systems in which we participate.

Higginson's installation finds a sharp contrast in Ford's *Axle*, a collection of digitally modelled blown glass vessels. Where *Coping Mechanisms* is appropriately overwhelming, far-reaching and fantastic, Ford's contributions have a deceptive simplicity. In an exhibition in which research-heavy installations dominate, *Axle* appears as an argument for beauty, for the value of seeking aesthetic pleasure in fine craft practices; you might stand and stare at their svelte, immaculate rendering and nothing else and leave the exhibition satisfied. In the accompanying

catalogue, Ford says that when he was finally “able to make the moulds and blow into them, it was like an epiphany.” A lightbulb moment, perhaps. (This metaphor — Edison again! — is literalised in one of Ford’s pieces, which stands alone by the café entrance, fitted with a bright light which only becomes activated when the object’s looker stands within a certain close distance.)

An axle, Ford says, “is a common term used for movement: turning, routing, spinning. It applies to so many different trades and industrial processes, it’s used for vehicles and motors and the main aim is to get momentum, to create energy.” It is this devotion to the generation of energy and beauty which distinguishes Ford’s body of work, and what lends it its aura of something like ecstasy. Somewhat paradoxically given the pieces’ simplicity, this nod to the ecstatic, to some higher power, make Ford’s contributions some of the most suggestive and engaging in the exhibition.

What makes an object a vessel, a gathering of materials and ideas an artwork? Both Higginson and Ford guide their lookers from the terrain of reality towards fantasy, invention, dream states, diversion, digression, distraction, and elsewhere in the realm of the imagined. To make is always a matter of imagination: which is to say, of belief in something greater and more mysterious than the really-lived world of human beings; a belief in something untouchable.